

Chapter Nineteen -- "I Saw Many True Lovers".

Courtin' must have been one of the most important things in our lives in the mountains. At any rate, I seem to remember more courtin' songs than nearly any other kind.

As far as the courtin' itself was concerned, I guess it was pretty much the same as you'll find anywhere. Some married for love, some for money, an' some just to keep from bein' old maids. Maybe it's in the mountains or on the plains or in a city; but when a young feller meets a girl that takes his eye, there's likely to be some sparkin' before long.

We called it pettin' an' honeyfugglin', an' I've heard a lot more an' less dignified words for it since. But the way it worked out was about the same.

He'd meet her at a dance or play party, or at church or a box social. Maybe he'd just smile at her, an' she'd smile back, or maybe he'd get to kiss her in a game of post office, an' they'd like the way it felt. If you've ever courted a girl, anywhere, I couldn't tell you anything you wouldn't already know. An' if you never have, you'd likely not be interested.

I never heard Grandma Swetnam's love story, but I know that Grandpa Stafford came courtin' George Ann Turner, an' the family was lookin' him over, just same as it would be today.

She was an orphan, an' lived with her grandpa an' grandma Pelphry. Grandpa was pore as a hant, an' the family was talkin'

it over, one way an' the other, till it came Great-Grandpa's turn.

He said: "Marry him if you can get him, Annie. His finger-nails are clean." An' she did. Right or wrong, it lasted till he died nearly seventy years later.

But I don't suppose any other girl ever got such a glimpse of the man she was goin' to marry as Mother did when she talked to the lady where Father was boardin' when they got engaged.

"Will's like this," she said. "After dinner, while we're still at the table, he'll say: 'Mandy, you can pour me just half of a third of a cup of coffee.' An' I pour it full, an' he drinks every bit of it."

The course of true love wasn't always so smooth, especially in our songs, which maybe were a little bent toward the seamy side of life.

There were the songs that warned girls against gay deceivers, such as:

Come, all you fair an' tender ladies,

Take warnin' how you court young men.

They're like a star on a bright summer mornin':

Soon as day appears, oh, they are gone.

They'll flatter an' tell you many fine stories;

They'll vow an' declare it is all true.

They tell it all to blight your glory.

That's all the love they have for you.

The ripest apple's soonest rotten:

The warmest love is soonest cold.

A young man's vows are so uncertain,
I pray you, girls, don't be too bold.

I wish I was some little sparrow,
An' you some lonesome turtle dove:
We'd fly away from sin an' sorrow,
To a land where all is joy an' love.

I guess there must have been some reason for warmin' for once in a while some girl would have a come-be-chance without the aid of law or clergy. Then they'd swear her as to who was the father, but I don't think it generally went much farther than that. Though I do recall that Uncle Sud Turner got kind of in the family's bad graces that way. They said that so far as anyone could remember, he was the first one of the Turners to have a bastard laid to him.

Once in a while some woman would give the valley a surprise, when it came to swearin' time, an' I don't think any of 'em ever beat old Tessie Pack in that line.

Tessie never did get married, but she had five babies. An' every time when they tried to swear her, she'd tell 'em that if the young'un had a pappy at all it must have been an angel, because she hadn't had anything to do with any man. If she was tellin' the truth, though, they didn't take after their pa, for none of 'em ever had wings, so far as we could see.

In the songs the proper thing for a girl to do when she was betrayed was to go off an' die. One of the saddest songs we had was the "Gypsy's Warnin'", which started off:

Trust him not, O gentle lady,
Though his voice be low an' sweet.

Heed him not who kneels before thee,
 Softly pleadin' at thy feet,
 For thy life is in its mornin';
 Cloud not this, thy happy lot.
 Listen to the gypsy's warnin':
 Gentle lady, trust him not.

Lady, once there lived a maiden,
 Young an' pure, an' like thee fair;
 But he wooed, he wooed an' won her,
 Filled her gentle heart with care.
 Yet he heeded not her weepin',
 He cared not her life to save.
 Soon she perished -- now she's sleepin'
 In yon cold an' silent grave.

Outside of the fact that it turned out in the last verse that the dead girl was the gypsy's only child, I don't think the song proved anything except that a graveyard was a pretty good place for courtin' even in that day.

The theory in those days was that a lover should try every way he could to seduce his sweetheart, an' if he couldn't succeed -- or if he succeeded an' got caught at it -- he should marry her.

But the number of songs where the lover offered the girl some inducement makes me think that money played about as much part in romance as it does today.

Of course, if a girl refused such offers, that was mighty nice

in a song. But sometimes it went the other way:

John's come home!

John's come ashore.

John's come from Ireland,

Where he has been before.

"Oh, what for luck, dear Johnnie,

Oh, what for luck?" cries she.

"I lost my ship an' cargo,

All on the ragin' sea.

"Call in your daughter Polly,

While all is melancholy,

An' wedded we will be."

"My daughter she is absent, John,

My daughter is away.

An' if she was here, John,

She would not let you stay."

When he heard these words

Young Johnny hung his head,

An' called for a candle,

To light his way to bed.

"The beds are full of strangers, John,

An' have been all this week.

Therefore, my dear Johnny,

Your lodgin' is to seek.

"There's twenty of the young, John,

in a song. But sometimes it went the other way:

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Therefore, my dear Johnny,

Your lodgin' is to seek.

"There's twenty of the young, John,

An' thirty of the old."
Young Johnny pulled out
His two hands full of gold.

"I only spoke in fun, John,
I only spoke in jest.
Without any exception, John,
She likes you the best."

In comes Polly
With a sweet smilin' face,
She hugs John, she kisses John,
An' John she does embrace.

"The great bed is empty, John,
An' you can lie with me."
His face grew dark with anger.
It was a sight to see.

"When I was a poor boy
My lodgin' was to seek;
Before I'd lie within your door
I'd lie out in the street.

"But now I've money plenty,
I'll make the taverns whirl,
With a bottle of good whiskey,
An' on each knee a girl."

Sometimes the girl in the song didn't care whether he had money or not. We had a little answer-back song that ran:

"Oh, madam, I have a fine little farm,
Just eighty acres wide.

An' it shall be at your command,
If you will be my bride, bride,
If you will be my bride."

"Oh, yes, I know your fine little farm,
An' also your fine fruit.

But if I come in, I'll turn you out,
You dirty, stinkin' brute, brute,
You dirty, stinkin' brute."

"Oh, madam I have a fine little horse,
Can pace just like the tide.

An' it shall be at your command,
If you will be my bride."

"Oh, yes, I know your fine little horse,
An' also your fine barn.

But the master, he gets drunk sometimes;
I'm afeared the horse might larn."

"Oh, madam, I have a fine little house,
Just lately rectified.

An' it shall be at your command,
If you will be my bride."

"Oh, yes, I know your fine little house,
 An' also your fine yards.
 But who will stay at home with your wife
 While you're out playin' cards?"

"Oh, madam I never play any cards,
 An' I hardly think it's right;
 But if you'll consent to be my bride,
 I'll not stay out a night."

"Oh, yes I know what you say that for:
 It's just to take me in.
 You think I've little sense enough
 To marry a barrel of gin."

"Oh, madam, I know you're very young,
 An' very hard to please;
 But when you get old an' chilled with cold,
 I hope to the Lord you'll freeze."

"When I get old an' chilled with cold,
 No clothes to keep me warm.
 I'll thank the Lord I've sense enough
 To keep me from all harm."

A lot of the courtin' was done right before the family, because lots of homes just had one room; an' in winter it just didn't seem to fit in to do like the man in the song:

I asked my love to take a walk,

To take a walk a little way.
 An' as we walk, we'll sweetly talk,
 Of when our weddin' day shall be.

Sometimes brothers or sisters would listen in an' tell afterwards how the courtin' sounded.

There was a little rigmarole for makin' love in such cases, that ran:

"Sleepy hon?"

"Sleepy some."

"Tired hon?"

"Tired some."

"Chilly hon?"

"Bout to freeze."

"Want my coat?"

"Just the sleeve."

But one of the Caudill boys was sittin' up late with his girl one night, an' when he got to noddin', she started to remind him of the rhyme. He was too far gone to catch it, an' when she said, "Is oo sick, or seepy?" he burst out: "Well, who wouldn't be sleepy sittin' up till all hours of the night?" But I think she married him, anyway.

There was another couple, an' some of the family swore their proposal went like this:

He: "I's a notion to bite yuh."

She: "What yuh notion to bite me for?"

"Caze yuh won't has me."

"Caze yuh won't ax me."

"Well now I ax yuh."

"Well, now yuh has me."

Maybe the courtin' wasn't always romantic, but it generally ended in marriage, if the man meant business an' nobody better was in sight.

One of our kin married a woman even after he caught her writin' to her sister: "He's one-armed, an' gray-headed an' as ugly as the Devil. But he's the only thing in sight, an' I'm goin' to marry him." She made him think she'd seen him tryin' to peek at her letter, an' wrote it to tease him.

After all, there weren't many jobs for women, then, an' they had to marry what they could get, or somebody would sing:

Nothin' to eat, an' nothin' to do.

Pore old maids.

But sit in the corner, an' sing "Whistle to Few".

Pore old maids.

To church, to meetin' we do go,

Pore old maids,

Hopin' for to catch a beau.

Pore old maids.

We go in an' we sit down;

Pore old maids.

The young men they do on us frown,

An' make our faces wrinkle down.

Pore old maids.

An' when we die to the Devil we'll go.

Pore old maids.

The bachelors'll be there, an' we'll all get a beau.

Pore old maids.